

Reza Negarestani

Reza Negarestani is a philosopher. He has contributed extensively to journals and anthologies and lectured at numerous international universities and institutes. His current philosophical project is focused on rationalist universalism beginning with the evolution of the modern system of knowledge and advancing toward contemporary philosophies of rationalism, their procedures, as well as their demands for special forms of human conduct. He is author of *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*.

Abstract: What Does It Mean to Think a Catastrophe

This presentation revolves around two lines of inquiry: What is precisely a catastrophe? And is every catastrophe a crisis?

By answering the first question, this presentation attempts to investigate the imports of a catastrophe for cognition. Following the works René Thom, Jean Petitot, [Wolfgang Wildgen](#), Lorenzo Magnani and recent works in conceptualization of processes (see Johanna Seibt, Svend Østergaard, et al.), we propose that not only cognitive systems use catastrophes – induced or natural – to organize information and generate semantic opportunities through which they can evolve, but also cognition as such is a generative catastrophe par excellence. Once the concept of catastrophe is sufficiently elaborated, it is then possible to tackle the second question, namely, if a catastrophe is a cognitive opportunity and if cognition is a generative catastrophe that must always be kept in a fragile state of equilibrium, then should we treat socio-political crises as windows of opportunity for understanding and action? We shall argue that engaging this question in the absence of a detailed and critical differentiation between catastrophe and crisis, between different types of stability and instability results in two predominant pathologies in thinking and acting upon crises. At one extreme, the conflation will lead to a rampant affirmationist position for which every rupture in socio-cultural fabric is seen as an engine of change or a potential positive singularity (cf. the philosophy of right-accelerationism). At the other pole, short of an adequate approach to map the distinctions and connections between the two, socio-political resignation or fundamentalist conservatism become the principle attitudes. Every catastrophe or singularity is immediately staved off as a threat. Novel approaches to crises are discarded in favor of trifling local solutions or worse, the all-encompassing impotence of resignation: Let's act in our immediate environment or let it be. As an alternative to these two extremes, this presentation aims at putting forward a third alternative built on a fine-grained map between catastrophe and crisis where the cognitive and critical opportunities, singularities and obstructions (or failures) fuse in order to delineate new affordances of action.